

Groups push mining mercury waste probe
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RENO, Nev. (AP) — The nation's largest gold producing state has been asked to investigate whether mercury emissions from the mines are contaminating area fisheries.

Citing a recent study by the University of Nevada, Reno, a coalition of environmentalists, health care advocates, sportsmen and American Indians said Thursday that a fish consumption advisory for mercury should be issued for one large reservoir in northeast Nevada and perhaps other fisheries downwind from mining operations.

Fish tissue samples collected by university researchers at Wild Horse Reservoir 60 miles north of Elko found mercury concentrations that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency considers a public health risk, especially to children and pregnant women, the groups said.

"We believe that an investigation into the public health risks from fish consumption from reservoirs, lakes and rivers in northern Nevada is warranted," they said in a letter to the state health administrator.

"It is important that Nevada families and visiting tourists have accurate information to determine which fish are safe to eat and how many fish are safe to eat."

The letter was written by Dan Randolph, executive director of the Great Basin Mine Watch, a nonprofit environmental watchdog group based in Reno. It was signed by representatives of the Nevada Nurses Association, Ormsby Sportsmens Group, Western Shoshone Defense Project, Institute for Children's Environmental Health and Earthworks, among others.

"We're concerned because the mercury levels in these fish are roughly twice the level that triggers a fish consumption advisory in Idaho," Randolph said.

State Health Administrator Alex Haartz will ask the state's health officer, Dr. Bradford Lee, to examine the study and the groups' request, spokeswoman Martha Framsted said.

"Keeping in mind that our mission is protecting the public health, this definitely will be reviewed by Dr. Lee and possibly others," she said.

The Nevada Division of Environmental Protection is charged with regulating air emissions and water quality, Framsted said, although environmental protection officials said any health warning would come from health officials.

There are about two-dozen major gold mines in Nevada. They produced 6.85 million ounces of gold in 2005 with a value of about \$3.05 billion — third in the world behind South Africa and Australia.

The coalition said the EPA's Toxic Release Inventory showed Nevada's mercury emissions totaled more than 4,605 pounds of mercury released in 2004 — more than 95 percent of it from gold mines in northern Nevada.

The Nevada mines are responsible for one-fourth of all U.S. mercury air emissions west of Texas, the mine watch said.

Scientists have reported high mercury levels in fish and waterfowl in Idaho and Utah downwind of the Nevada mines, the groups said.

"Yet very little monitoring has been done to determine the extent of mercury contamination in fish and waterfowl in northern Nevada," they said. The mining watchdog group has criticized new state regulations adopted last year because they don't include a cap on mercury emissions.

Environmental protection division spokesman Dante Pistone said the agency is implementing the new rules, which he said are the first of their kind in the nation and will result in "an aggressive, comprehensive, robust regulatory program for mercury emissions."

"Both the mining and power plant regulations go beyond what the federal government and other states have enacted," he said. "Once the regulations are fully implemented, mercury emissions will be highly controlled."

Russ Fields, president of the Nevada Mining Association, said state's gold mines are working cooperatively with the state and the EPA to adopt the new controls.

"They have made tremendous progress and we expect to see more progress," he said. He said he doesn't know what could be causing the mercury readings at the reservoir so could not comment on that.

Most of the mines operate on federal lands, many of which the Western Shoshone tribe claims as their own.

"These companies are operating in this manner without our consent. They need to stop and be honest about the hazards they are creating in our communities," said Larson Bill of the Western Shoshone Defense Project.

The fish tissue samples collected at the reservoir showed mercury concentrations ranging from 0.42 parts per million to 0.55 ppm, with an average of 0.47 ppm.

EPA guidelines recommend limiting consumption of fish with concentrations of 0.47 ppm to 0.94 ppm to just one 8-ounce meal per month for adults. It recommends pregnant women and children younger than 14 not eat fish containing mercury. Children and fetuses are particularly vulnerable to the toxic metal, which can damage the development of the nervous system.

Idaho issues an advisory when mercury concentrations in fish exceed 0.24 ppm and initiates a process to identify and reduce the mercury source, Randolph said.